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ABSTRACT

Recently, the professional literature as well as the media have focused on the achievement gap between African American and White students. Although some of the solutions proposed are grounded in substantive thinking, others are representative of the typical quick fixes that continue to dominate public education while not improving the teaching and learning of these children. Successfully educating African American students is a complex process involving both big-picture considerations and specific instructional strategies. At the very least, students need to know that adults in their lives truly care about them. To help improve Black students' academic outcomes, educators should demonstrate genuine caring as they act in specific ways to enhance achievement. This paper defines "caring" and then discusses genuine caring for students. The paper next discusses caring and literacy learning regarding students, suggesting literacy practices that should be part of the educator's repertoire, including: encourage lively discussions, immerse children in drama, support lifetime literacy efforts, and build resilience in literacy learners. It notes that Black students especially benefit from these practices because they encounter more adversity and challenges in their daily lives and thus need more support in school. The paper also sees as important for Black children's academic success the hiring of African American teachers as role models, preparing culturally competent educators, and implementing culturally pertinent curricula. (Contains 36 references.) (NKA)

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Genuine Caring and Literacy Learning for African American Children

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Recently, the professional literature as well as the media have focused on the achievement gap between African American and White students. A number of reasons have been suggested for this dilemma, including a lack of culturally pertinent curricula, a biased view that Black culture if deficient rather than different from majority cultures, and a demographic perspective concerning a critical shortage of Black teachers serving as role models. Not surprisingly, a number of solutions have been proposed affecting the process and content of educating African American children more successfully. Although some of these solutions are grounded in substantive thinking, others are representative of the typical quick fixes that continue to dominate public education while not improving the teaching and learning of these children.

Successfully educating African American students is a complex process involving both big-picture considerations and specific instructional strategies. At the very least, students need to know that adults in their lives truly care about them. From this foundation, trusting relationships develop and serve as an essential context for learning. While this bridge from caring to learning is necessary for a successful school career, it is vitally important for African American children who tend to experience more challenges in their personal and academic lives. Thus, they benefit from the type of support that nurtures emotional growth and simultaneously provides optimal conditions for effective learning.

Interestingly, many students from both minority and non-minority backgrounds share increased challenges in their daily lives because of today's demographic trends, including (1) a 50% - 60% divorce rate; (2) a changing family structure involving married, single, and remarried parents who are devoting substantial time and energy to

their careers; (3) a decrease in adult supervision after school, which has resulted in more adolescents experimenting with gangs, sex, drugs, and alcohol; (4) an increase in family problems, conflicts with friends, depression, difficulties with male-female relationships, and feelings of worthlessness, which has led to a rise in the percentage of teenagers who attempted suicide or considered suicide; and (5) an increase in the number of hours each week that elementary school children watch television (Sanacore, 2001). While this potentially toxic mix is detrimental to most children's emotional and intellectual development, it tends to impact more substantially on African American students.

To ameliorate some of this stress and to help improve Black students' academic outcomes, educators should demonstrate genuine caring as they act in specific ways to enhance achievement. Because success across the curriculum is predicated on good relationships and effective literacy learning, this paper focuses on improving the school culture and its related literacy practices. The following suggestions are therefore intended to support this direction. Although they are presented individually, they work best in concert. Teachers and administrators should consider these and other suggestions from the professional literature and practical experience as they work in deliberate ways to improve their teaching-learning environment.

Genuine caring for students

Although caring has many definitions, Thayer-Bacon (1993, 1997, 1998) and Thayer-Bacon and Bacon (1996) support a relational epistemology model in which the importance of caring relationships is connected to students' learning. In this model, students of different cultures and genders are viewed holistically and, thus, are given

serious attention concerning their social, emotional, intellectual, and interactive needs. This broad, humanistic response to learners as whole people increases their chances of being successful. From a relational perspective, some of Thayer-Bacon's (1993) ingredients of caring include: people developing openness and receptiveness to others and their ideas; people hearing voices of others more completely and fairly; and people respecting others as separate, autonomous, and worthy of caring. "It is an attitude that gives value to others by denoting that others are worth attending to in a serious or close manner. An attitude of acceptance or trust, inclusion and openness, is important in all caring relationships." (p. 325)

An important aspect of genuine caring is for educators to persevere in developing an understanding of and a sensitive response to their students' culture. Without such understanding and sensitivity, teachers and administrators will not eradicate some of the cultural obstacles to advancing Black students' achievement. Among these obstacles is the regrettable mismatch—or clash—between home and school cultures, sometimes referred to as cultural discontinuity (Au, 1993; Jordan, 2001; Sanacore, 2000). This mismatch can exacerbate learners' at-risk situation because they do not possess the experiences in the community, family, and home on which success in school is based. Consequently, these children are entangled in a mismatch between the experiences that they have and what their schools expect for success. Ironically, these students do not have a condition called "at-riskness." Instead, they are caught in an 'at-risk" environment that does not accommodate their learning needs (Levin, 1992; Sanacore, 1994; Sanacore & Wilsusen 1995).

The importance of accommodation is especially prevalent on two levels. The first is an acceptance that African American learners are culturally different and, thus, require a culturally sensitive response within their learning environment. Such a response might include a structured (though not rigid) classroom that provides opportunities for more interaction and physical movement. For example, rhythm and rhyme, cooperative activities, and interactive discussions increase the chances that African American children will succeed in school (Delpit, 1992; Diller, 1999; Sanacore, 2000). The second level of accommodation concerns language. Often, Black students are denigrated for using Black English, which is as natural for them as Standard English is for their White peers and teachers. Black English represents not only a secure and an understandable form of communication for African American children, but also a deep sense of love, warmth, and affection from their parents, grandparents, siblings, and friends. When Black English is respected and valued as being legitimate, the children are more open to learning Standard English (Delpit, 1995). These two basic considerations for caring go a long way in helping African American students achieve success in school because they are more likely to maintain their own cultural identity and, thus, less prone to be alienated from their school culture.

Caring and literacy learning

Although African American children come to school with the stigma that they are at risk of failing academically, educators sometimes forget that these learners have the same capacity as White students to be curious, responsive, energetic, and effective learners. Believing in students' efficacy to be successful in school is vitally important for

helping these delightful learners fulfill this prophecy. Moving in this direction, however, requires a tremendous amount of thoughtful planning and focused energy, and this type of caring has its greatest value when it supports students' literacy learning. As students achieve success in reading and writing, their academic self-esteem and self-confidence flourish as they develop a growing awareness that their accomplishments across the curriculum are attributed to their own hard work. What follows are suggestions that attempt to connect genuine caring and literacy practices for African American students. These suggestions are not intended to be comprehensive, to be followed in a prescriptive, sequential fashion, or to be a panacea. Rather, they should be part of educators' repertoire and should be used, when needed, during the school year.

- **Encourage lively discussions.** Although classroom discussions occur every day, they are often reduced to an interrogation format in which the teacher asks prescribed questions at the literal level of functioning and then expects students to respond with "correct" answers. These low expectations are more prevalent with working-class and minority children because of biases—sometimes well-intentioned—about what these children "really" need to be successful learners. This perspective supports mastery of basic skills, including systematic phonics, before the children become immersed in books. Such reasoning, however, prevents meaningful conversations of multicultural and traditional children's books, which are essential resources for maintaining children's interest in learning and for developing critical thinking. A focus on basic skills to the preclusion, or de-emphasis, of meaningful activities reduces opportunities for interactive discussions and causes another cultural obstacle to Black children's academic success.

To prevent such negative outcomes, teachers and administrators should provide diverse learners with many experiences in lively, small-group discussions. These learners benefit substantially from opportunities to respond to literature (Klassen (1993). They are capable of engaging in meaningful discussions about books, of demonstrating leadership during these discussions, and of profiting from peer support (Brock, 1997; Martinez-Roldan & Lopez-Robertson, 1999/2000; Raphael, Brock, & Wallace, 1997).

Literature circles are one way of grouping students for active discussions of authentic literature, and these small-group sharing sessions are structured in a variety of ways to elicit a diversity of student responses. For example, while reading aloud *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears* (Aardema, Dillon, & Dillon, 1975), the teacher can invite the whole class to join him or her in such interactive activities as looking at the illustrations, predicting story content, and engaging in choral reading of predictable language that gradually builds to the incremental refrain:

> So, it was the rabbit
> who startled the cow
> who alarmed the monkey
> who killed the owlet—
> and now Mother Owl won't wake the sun
> so that the day can come.

Then, the teacher can form literature circles consisting of about four students and can demonstrate different ways of responding to this West African tale, including the following types of responses suggested by Martinez-Roldan & Lopez-Robertson (1999/2000): "living through the experience" (e.g., identifying and being sensitive to the

characters' feelings); "looking closely at the text and illustrations" (e.g., using illustrations to make meaning of text and to initiate conversation); "exploring social issues" (e.g., becoming aware of social, political, and cultural concerns); and "making connections" (e.g., relating the story to one's life, to other stories, and to books). After sharing and demonstrating literature and ways of responding, the teacher needs to encourage and monitor the quality of students' progress in the small-group settings. Incorporating effective literature circles into the classroom community takes time, and their success is dependent on the enthusiasm and patience of the teacher, the number of children in the classroom, the number of small groups, and the availability of children's books, including multiple copies of certain books for group discussions.

- **Immerse children in drama.** A complement to sharing literature and encouraging interactive small groups is the use of drama activities to foster a love of reading. Basic ways of using drama include puppetry, pantomime, singing, dancing, and improvisation. Another basic consideration is to have children act out parts of favorite books, for example, to be passionate while reading excerpts from some of the speeches in *I Have a Dream: The Life and Words of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Haskins, 1993). A more elaborate use of drama is readers' theater, which connects reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Readers' theater is well-matched with children's needs and interests. In addition to supporting multicultural perspectives, it is extremely sensitive to English language learners. Readers' theater also supports meaning making and fluency, applies easily to expository and narrative text, encourages cooperative learning in flexible groups, and nurtures positive interpersonal relationships, which are considered an

important school climate dimension (Haynes, 1998; Leu & Kinzer, 1999; Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998/1999; Sanacore, 2000, 2002b).

Readers' theater is probably introduced more effectively in a structured, teacher-directed format, such as the one proposed by Martinez, Roser, and Strecker (1998/1999). Initially, the teacher selects three works of children's literature and writes scripts for each. Then, the teacher follows a 5-day format consisting of the following activities:

Day 1 Teacher models fluency by reading aloud the stories on which the week's scripts are based.

Teacher offers a brief minilesson that presents explicit explanation of some aspect of fluency.

The teacher and students discuss each of the three stories.

Students begin to practice reading personal copies of scripts, reading all the parts independently.

Teacher encourages students to take these unmarked scripts home for further practice.

Day 2 Students gather in repertory groups. Teacher provides scripts for each group with specific parts highlighted.

Students read the script, taking a different part with each reading.

Teacher circulates among the three repertory groups, coaching and providing feedback.

Day 3 Procedures are the same as for Day 2.

During the final five minutes, students within each repertory group negotiate and assign roles for Day 5's performance.

Teacher encourages children to pay special attention to their newly assigned performance role when practicing at home.

Day 4 Students read and reread the parts to which they are assigned within their repertory groups.

During the final 10 minutes, students make character labels and discuss where each will stand during the performance.

Day 5 Repertory groups "perform," reading before an audience. (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998/1999, p. 331)

When ease and facility are achieved with this structured approach to readers' theater, teachers and students can develop other approaches that provide more flexibility.

- **Support lifetime literacy efforts.** Part of the big picture in advancing literacy learning for all children is to instill a lifetime love of reading. Unless children learn to enjoy reading and to engage in reading as a lifelong activity, they will not reach their full literacy potential in school and in life. Unfortunately, nationwide initiatives with an emphasis on standards, basic skills, and culturally biased standardized testing have caused educators to refocus their instructional priorities on these external requirements. This narrow view of what is important for children has resulted in teachers and administrators succumbing to a "teach-for-the-test" perspective, instead of emphasizing more important considerations for children's growth and development. Ivey and Broaddus (2000) believe:

> ...pressures from high-stakes testing create confusion over what ought to be taught in reading programs. In our recent work in reading and language arts classrooms, we have observed teachers not only teaching skills for taking

comprehension tests, but also covering topics and content that appear on test passages as opposed to focusing on the kind of instruction that would lead students toward becoming lifelong, independent readers. (p. 76)

Interestingly, students who have many opportunities to engage in meaningful reading not only perform better on reading comprehension tests but also perform as well on skills tests, when compared to students who are given a skills approach. These results suggest that a focus on isolated, systematic skills is not necessary and does not have to precede meaningful reading (Krashen, 1999, 2000, 2001). Conversely, immersing children in meaningful reading and writing encourages them to develop the habit of reading and also to use reading and writing as useful contexts for improving necessary skills and strategies (Sanacore, 2002b).

For these reasons, providing time for daily independent reading is a vitally important goal. Black children need experience selecting and reading materials every day and having their choices respected. Classroom libraries should be appealing, support instructional themes across the curriculum, and consist of multicultural and traditional literature. Allington (2001) recommends that elementary schools organize a minimum of *90 minutes of actual in-school reading* each day.

One approach to adopting this comprehensive recommendation is to structure the curriculum by themes and to encourage related content-area reading. Thus, if a primary school theme focuses on family/relationships, the teacher might begin each school day with a morning message that supports the theme and that the children read chorally several times. Then, to maintain a lively momentum, the teacher might read aloud interesting, meaningful literature, such as *Aunt Flossie's Hats (and Crab Cakes Later)*

(Howard & Ransome, 1991). Afterward, during independent reading time, the children are encouraged to read this warm family story (assuming multiple copies are available) or to read other books from the classroom library concerning the theme. As the school day progresses, the teacher should provide more opportunities to read across the curriculum about family/relationships or to read about other content-area themes. Not surprisingly, children even choose to read during free time, especially if the teacher is also reading for pleasure. This positive momentum with actual reading is more likely to continue when literacy learners are able to talk about exciting characters and events in their reading. Such sharing creates a contagious energy level, which further motivates the children and their peers to continue reading and sharing. This context supports Allington's (2001) thoughtful recommendation concerning actual in-school reading and simultaneously increases the chances that African American children will develop the lifetime reading habit.

Experiences with actual reading also encourage teachable moments for connecting skills to meaningful contexts. For example, after experiencing *Aunt Flossie's Hats (and Crab Cakes Later)*, some of the children might need support with the *at* or *ake* rimes. If so, the teacher can engage the children in word blending and word building activities concerning these rimes and related onsets, for instance, /s/ + /at/ and /m/ + /ake/. Connecting skills to meaningful contexts is a more effective teaching approach than is presenting skills through workbooks and skill sheets because young literacy learners are more likely to remain focused on learning and to realize the value of this connection. Even if additional skill reinforcement is needed on subsequent school days, the children are still more aware that the purpose of learning skills is to read (and write)

more effectively. The best type of reinforcement, however, is application of newly learned skills to another meaningful context, such as a storybook, an informational book, or a writing activity. In retrospect, connecting skills to authentic resources makes sense, but it should not be overdone. Otherwise, the natural flow of personal meaning making, fluency, and pleasure reading might be compromised or negated. Caring teachers work cooperatively with their community of learners in determining when skills—phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, grammar—should be taught through context or should be learned naturally through book immersion.

- **Build resilience in literacy learners.** Although acquiring skills is important, helping Black children achieve academic success is predicated on the key players expecting success to occur. Both teachers and their students need to believe in the efficacy that meaningful learning and focused energy will result in positive literacy outcomes that transfer across the curriculum. For a variety of reasons, including the mismatch between home and school cultures, many African American students do not reach their academic potential. Moreover, the greater adversities they encounter in their daily lives exacerbate the achievement gap between their academic performance and that of their more advantaged peers. Although these challenges are sometimes overwhelming, Black learners still have strong potential to be resilient and to lead productive lives in school and in society.

Teachers can be especially helpful by initially distinguishing resilient and nonresilient learners. Among the evaluative criteria to consider are academics (high-achieving vs. low-achieving), classroom behavior (very motivated vs. not motivated), and attendance (excellent vs. poor) (Padron, Waxman, and Huang 1999). Then, teachers

should gather information about children's resilient and nonresilient behavior through either informal means or formal instruments. One of the useful instruments for gathering data is the My Class Inventory, which gauges students' perceptions of the learning environment. Students respond with either "Yes" or "No" to 30 items representing the following scales that are well-connected to literacy lessons: satisfaction, friction, competition, difficulty, and cohesion. Another instrument is the Classroom Observation Schedule, which teachers use during instruction to observe students with regard to the following criteria: (1) interactions (e.g., with teacher or students and with instructional or social intent); (2) selection of activity (e.g., by the teacher or the student); (3) types of activity (e.g., writing, reading, listening, or painting); (4) setting (e.g., whole class, small group, paired, or individual); (5) manner (e.g. on task or off task); and (6) language used (e.g., English, Spanish, or both). Additional information concerning the My Class Inventory and the Classroom Observation Schedule is found in Fraser, Anderson, and Walberg (1982), Padron, Waxman, and Huang (1999), Sanacore (2000, in preparation), and Waxman, Wang, Lindvall, and Anderson (1988).

Identifying resilient and nonresilient learners is useful for deciding who rebounds easily and who needs more help. Both types of learners, however, benefit from varying degrees of guidance in realizing that their personal and academic accomplishments are directly attributed to their hard work. Fortunately, educators can provide such guidance by using research-supported action strategies and by creatively integrating the strategies with literacy-learning practices across the curriculum. These action strategies include brainstorming, creative problem solving, goal setting, critical thinking and reflection, sensitivity to social learning, and friendship support networks (Bruce, 1995). Other

strategies that build resilience in literacy learners emphasize the importance of increasing children's participation in a nonthreatening learning environment. Encouraging and respecting children's choices about their reading and writing (Sanacore, 1999) and demonstrating inclusive questions that motivate more student participation (Sanacore, in preparation) are only a few of the interactive considerations that promote resilience.

Advocating for African American Literacy Learners

Helping African American children achieve academic success is a complex process involving a variety of factors. Foremost is genuine caring for these delightful learners, accompanied by instructional practices that support successful literacy learning. These practices include nurturing lively discussions, immersing children in drama, supporting lifetime literacy efforts, and building resilience in literacy learners. Although such practices are important for all learners, Black students especially benefit from them because they encounter more adversity and challenges in their daily lives and, thus, need more support in school.

Within the scope and space limitations of this paper, other factors that are important for Black children's academic success have not been highlighted, such as hiring African American teachers as role models, preparing culturally competent educators, and implementing culturally pertinent curricula. These and other considerations are the focus of Jordan's (2001) thoughtful work. Complementing this perspective is the need for quality, public, pre-kindergarten education as well as smaller teacher-student ratios from pre-K to grade 12. In addition, Black children profit from specific instructional approaches concerning prior knowledge activation, immersion in

higher-level thinking, opportunities to engage in storytelling, and exposure to classroom libraries with a wide variety of multicultural and traditional literature consisting of different types of text (expository, narrative, descriptive, and poetic). Furthermore, individual learners who are at risk of academic failure need classroom and specialist teachers who plan cooperatively to reinforce similar goals, content, resources, strategies, skills, evaluative approaches, and other aspects of curricular congruence. Teachers and administrators who support these and other considerations are promoting a caring environment that nurtures literacy learning and also increases the chances that African American children will lead successful academic and personal lives.

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